

Heaven Has No Sorrow that Earth Cannot Feel: The Ethics of Empathy and Ecological Suffering in the Old Testament¹

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Abstract

All of creation groans with us while waiting for ultimate redemption, writes Paul (Rom 8); but several Old Testament prophets also give voice to the natural world's suffering due to our social injustice and selfishness. Do we feel the pain of non-human creatures empathetically, leading to repentance and compassion, or are we dismissive of such sentimentalism? This study introduces the emerging field of ecological virtue ethics with attention to emotional dispositions such as empathy, sympathy, and compassion. This has the advantage of approaching environmental issues from a different angle than the usual appeals to duty-based stewardship or pragmatic consequences alone. Mature empathy refuses to settle for a narrow imagination about the pain of other creatures yet also reaches beyond the cute and cuddly with the help of other virtues. The second half of the study outlines a biblical theology of personified ecological suffering in the Old Testament in order to see the kinds of suffering involved, the reasons for suffering, and the biblical responses to such pain. By combining ecological virtue ethics with biblical theology, we can attend to the suffering of creation in the Scriptures and in our present contexts, in order to cultivate empathetic sensitivity that benefits our Christian character and our communities. With ears to hear the pain, we can overcome denial and despair.

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1. Introduction

The title of this study is an allusion to Thomas Moore's hymn from 1816 entitled "Come, Ye Disconsolate." The initial refrain assures us that "Earth has no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal." David Crowder echoes this line in his 2014 song "Come As You Are."² Each refrain suggests that all *human* troubles on earth can be healed by God. But ecologically this is also our Christian hope for the rest of creation, since the whole creation "groans," as Paul puts it in Romans 8 (Rom 8:22)—groaning in pain and awaiting God's renewal at the resurrection (Rom 8:18–27; Col 1:15–20). But as we wait with our non-human neighbors, there is a complex and painful mess of unintended damage and self-interested exploitation that is not helping the ecological systems of our world to heal.

On its own, merely learning more details about the losses and crises does not equate to positive change in society, economic policy, or our personal courage and hope. As the contemplative wisdom tradition of Ecclesiastes puts it, "those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (Eccl 1:18 NRSV). Or, as American environmentalist Aldo Leopold wrote, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."³ While this is not the whole story, the Bible also portrays the natural world at times as a "world of wounds" and invites us to enter into that suffering, to feel it viscerally, and to be transformed through it. The Old Testament is a particularly profound resource for cultivating such empathetic sorrow and compassion.

In other words, part of the motivation for this study is to see if we could take a different approach to caring for the natural world, an approach not based on fear tactics or alarmist statistics and not based on well-worn appeals to "stewardship" duties, trendy animal "rights," or to consequences alone. It is my claim that we need an alternative, though complementary, approach to addressing our ethical (and unethical) engagement with the ecosystems in which we live. We need an approach that is not primarily a cognitive assault of information overload. Since all of creation is groaning in its suffering, and since we suffer as members of the created order too (cf. Rom 8:18–27), perhaps we could appeal to *emotional* virtues like empathy and compassion as motivations for us to change our harmful habits.

2 Thomas Moore, "Come, Ye Disconsolate, Where'er Ye Languish," in *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958), hymn 569. Hear the recent (2014) adaptation by David Crowder, "Come As You Are," in *Neon Steeple* (sixsteps Records, 2014). An earlier adaptation of Moore's refrain in Old Testament scholarship is that by Karen Pidcock-Lester, "'Earth Has No Sorrow That Earth Cannot Heal': Job 38–41," in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, ed. William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 125–32.

3 Aldo Leopold and Luna B. Leopold, *Round River* (Minocqua, WI: NorthWord, 1991), 165. Note Kathryn D. Blanchard and Kevin J. O'Brien's elaboration on Leopold: "To understand how serious environmental problems are, to know one's own complicity in the degradation of creation, and to feel responsible for helping to heal the world in the face of its deep sickness is indeed to live in a world of wounds." Blanchard and O'Brien, *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism: Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 168.

One way to attend to these character traits is to draw on the emerging field of ecological virtue ethics. Besides taking the path less traveled compared to most environmental stewardship discussions, this approach is also refreshing because it does not reiterate the Bible's overly-treated creation passages.

In the first half of this essay I give some definitions of the relevant emotions and virtues and address some common objections to "sentimentalism." Mature empathy refuses to settle for a narrow imagination about the pain of other creatures yet also goes beyond the cute and the cuddly, via the help of other virtues. The second half of the essay outlines a biblical theology that is focused on personified ecological suffering in the Old Testament, including the *kinds* of suffering involved, the *reasons* for suffering, and the biblical *responses* to such suffering.

My thesis is that by combining ecological virtue ethics and biblical theology we can attend to the suffering of the world in the Scriptures and in our lived contexts, in such a way as to stimulate a compassionate sensitivity that benefits our Christian character and our world. Since "earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal," it is equally true that *heaven* has no sorrow that earth cannot *feel*.

2. Emotions, Empathy, and Ecological Virtue Ethics

Some preliminary definitions of terms are in order. A selective use of fields such as philosophy and psychology will contribute to this interdisciplinary conversation with a Christian biblical theology of ecological suffering.

2.1 Defining emotions, feelings, and virtues

Emotions can be defined as our "impressions" of the world; these impressions can be sensed bodily as feelings and cultivated into passions that make up our moral character, whether virtues or vices.⁴ Like a passion for gardening or watching films, moral passions can be trained and shaped by our behavior, concepts, and narratives (by which I mean, ways of looking at the world), and thus Christian emotions can be shaped by biblical texts, among many other factors.⁵

2.2 Defining empathy, sympathy, and compassion

Empathy and sympathy are similar capacities, and both ideally contribute to compassion. Philosopher Jullinna Oxley defines empathy as the capacity to feel a similar emotion *because* another person is feeling that emotion (such emotion

4 Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 11. Emotions are closer to impressions than to judgments (ibid., 17, 19). While emotions are popularly equated with feelings, the reason for distinguishing them is because emotions are holistic, physical-spiritual responses that cannot simply be identified with the related sensations that manifest emotions or prompt them.

5 Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 27–31.

can be negative or positive).⁶ For this study we are concerned with empathetic *distress* in feeling the pain of another entity or organism.⁷ Sympathy goes one step further. It entails concern *for* someone, feeling sorrow for another person who is feeling a negative emotion.⁸ The difference is between feeling distress *because of* another's distress (empathy) versus feeling sorry *for* the distressed person (sympathy), though there is much overlap.⁹ Compassion is a combination of empathy/sympathy combined with loving concern and conduct toward another.¹⁰ The opposing vices of compassion, sympathy, and empathy are apathy and aloofness, the refusal to see and identify with the other.¹¹

There are various ways that empathy can be stimulated and cultivated, from the rudimentary mimicry of babies crying within earshot of each other to more advanced modes of stimulation such as role-taking or "mediated association" through spoken or written texts.¹² Texts can provide us with the context and reasons for another's emotions,¹³ and therefore the biblical texts portraying ecological suffering are one means of stimulating empathetic distress and compassionate dispositions

6 Julinna C. Oxley, *The Moral Dimensions of Empathy: Limits and Applications in Ethical Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 32. This flexible definition requires only that the empathizer's emotions are adequately similar to those experienced by the other person (the emotion need not be identical or equally strong in effect, and the emotion can match a positive or negative one). The definition is also broad enough to include any means of gaining empathetic understanding or resonance. For a summary of other definitions for empathy across various disciplines, see C. Daniel Batson, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena," in *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, ed. Jean Decety and William Ickes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 4–8.

7 Oxley, *Moral Dimensions of Empathy*, 171, n. 8.

8 Ibid., 17. See also Michael Slote, "Virtue Ethics and Moral Sentimentalism," in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Bristol, CT: Acumen, 2014), 58.

9 Thus, while sympathy is a moral virtue, empathy is technically a cognitive virtue of "open-mindedness to others" that can be used along with other virtues and values to develop positive moral characteristics and habits. Oxley, *Moral Dimensions of Empathy*, 131–32.

10 Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 179. Roberts says that compassion includes the "construal of a suffering or deficient person as a cherished fellow." When viewing the weakness, suffering, or dysfunction in the other, a compassionate person will be motivated to act accordingly in the best interests of the one suffering (ibid., 180, 187–90). Roberts notes that in comparison to Greek literature and the virtue ethics of Aristotle, biblical texts are distinctive in that compassion is not reserved for those innocent of their suffering. Instead, Jewish and Christian compassion is modeled on God's own compassion and can extend to those guilty of wrongdoing and its punishment. Having experienced divine compassion in our own natural and moral suffering, we have motivation to be compassionate to others who, like us, are not innocent but are both perpetrators and victims.

11 Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 181.

12 See the influential overview of Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 5, 7, 21, 49–52. According to Oxley, role-taking involves imagining another's perspective and feelings either via "self-focused" empathy (how would *I* feel in their shoes?), "other-focused" empathy (how would *they* feel in their shoes?), or "dual-perspective" empathy where we imagine both perspectives. Oxley, *Moral Dimensions of Empathy*, 23. Jean Porter observes that other-focused virtues cannot be cleanly separated from self-focused virtues. Porter, "Virtue Ethics," in *Textbook of Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill, 4th ed. (1986. Reprint: London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 120, 123.

13 Oxley, *Moral Dimensions of Empathy*, 41.

and actions. An array of texts and events shape our ability to experience empathetic and sympathetic distress—to emotionally suffer *with* and *for* others.

These emotions, however, do not always produce positive responses or actions helpful to the one suffering.¹⁴ Certainly the distress could motivate sympathy and compassion, but it could also provoke anger, indignation at injustice, fear, avoidance, despair, guilt over inaction, guilt over causing the pain in the other, and so on. Empathy is also biased towards suffering we can see, suffering which is more urgent, and suffering experienced by those more similar than different to us.¹⁵ There can be other defects of selfishness in our character that form additional barriers to empathy.¹⁶ By itself, therefore, empathetic distress is not enough. Mature empathy requires a respect for the other entity or person as valuable, and must be exercised along with other virtues such as prudence, courage, humble temperance, righteousness, faith(fulness), hope, and love.¹⁷

These balancing virtues will keep us from the extremes of sentimentalism, on the one hand, where the cheesy and cliché reign supreme, and callous apathy, on the other hand, where we simply don't feel anything emotional even when entire watersheds are suffering from human carelessness.

2.3 *Environmental empathy as sentimentalism or open-mindedness?*

Since we are about to look at personified suffering of the non-human world in the Old Testament, we must address the issue of whether personifying non-human creatures and features of the landscape is a legitimate means of empathizing with them. We in the West are very quick to scoff at anthropomorphic plants or animals (as found, for example, in Disney's *Pocahontas*). We tend to dismiss this as so

14 For studies linking empathy to “prosocial” behavior see Nancy Eisenberg, Tracy L. Spinrad, and Zoe E. Taylor, “Sympathy,” in *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, ed. Stan van Hooft (Bristol, CT: Acumen, 2014), 410.

15 Slote, “Virtue Ethics and Moral Sentimentalism,” 59; Oxley, *Moral Dimensions of Empathy*, 146.

16 For example, there might be a deficit of previous suffering in one's life, a selfish bent to relieve, or wallow in, only one's *own* pain, as Jonah did (Jonah 4:3–11; see the insightful comment in Job 14:22). Or there might be an emotional dissociation from one's former or future vulnerability that breeds contempt for others who are weak or suffering. On these possibilities, see Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 183–86. Eisenberg, Spinrad, and Taylor, “Sympathy,” 410 describe the second obstacle—known in the literature as “personal distress”—as resulting in “the egoistic motivation to make oneself, not the other person, feel better.”

17 Blanchard and O'Brien, *Introduction to Christian Environmentalism*. See also Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions*, 191–93. Other relevant publications on ecological virtue ethics include Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Creation Care and Character: The Nature and Necessity of the Ecological Virtues,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 50/3 (1998): 6–21; Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Ronald L. Sandler and Philip Cafaro, eds., *Environmental Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Marilyn Holly, “Environmental Virtue Ethics: A Review of Some Current Work,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 19/4 (2006): 391–424; Ronald L. Sandler, *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Philip Cafaro and Ronald L. Sandler, eds., *Virtue Ethics and the Environment* (New York: Springer, 2010).

much sentimentalism, romanticism, or animism. But this dismissal is often informed by our faith in scientific modernism, which has disenchanted the world—a faith that is at odds with many parts of the biblical tradition.¹⁸ In our disenchanted modernism, “The world around us has become an ‘it’ rather than a ‘thou.’”¹⁹

To be sure, re-enchanting our feelings toward the world does not involve “naïve literalism” when we hear: “The land mourns and languishes” (Isa 33:9) or “How the animals groan!” (Joel 1:18). Yet neither is it proper to dismiss these personifications as “just” metaphors; that would result in our objectifying any creature that was not human, which would distance us from the rest of creation.²⁰ Perhaps we could resist a hasty and reductive imagination that considers only neurological pain and rational willpower. As an alternative, we could consider that some organisms experience pain and that even plants exercise something analogous to intentionality, though this would be in a different manner than our own—as when plants respond to loss by scarring or drooping.²¹

True, trees cannot literally “clap their hands” with joy (Isa 55:12) as humans can, but such metaphors portray the literal reality that trees can, indeed, respond to their Creator and to other creatures with various degrees of living responsiveness, whether in flourishing or in suffering.²² If we have missed this ecologically significant fact, is it because our scientific modernism tends to “make us deaf to the actual experiences of creaturely responsibility and kinship?”²³ The biblical metaphors help us not only “hear” the responsiveness of trees, but also shape our ethical vision of mutual roles in the world.²⁴ Rather than primarily viewing trees as “lumber,” such metaphors encourage us to treat them (and other creatures) as “kin rather than commodity.”²⁵

18 Brian J. Walsh, Marianne B. Karsh, and Nik Ansell, “Trees, Forestry, and the Responsiveness of Creation,” *Cross Currents* 44/2 (1994): 151–52.

19 Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 17.

20 Walsh, Karsh, and Ansell, “Trees, Forestry,” 153.

21 See Walsh, Karsh, and Ansell, “Trees, Forestry” for an excellent treatment of the biological and metaphorical dimensions of whether trees (and by extension other nonhuman creatures) can act as agents when our disenchanted Western imaginations fight against this way of seeing the world.

22 Ibid., 160.

23 Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Stittler, and Juergen Moltmann*, AARAS 91 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 283.

24 Walsh, Karsh, and Ansell, “Trees, Forestry,” 160. They note that metaphors function “both as visions of the world (or interpretive frameworks) and as visions for the world (providing an orientation for cultural and ecological praxis).”

25 Earth Bible Team, “The Voice of Earth: More than Metaphor?” in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel, The Earth Bible 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 28. “Earthlings” (אֲדָמָה) and “earth” (אֶרֶץ) are not just mutual servants in Gen 2:5 and 15, after all, but kin with literal common “ground” (Gen 2:7), observes William P. Brown, “The Moral Cosmologies of Creation,” in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 14. See more on ecological metaphors and personification of the natural world in Terence E. Fretheim, “Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms,” *ExAud* 3 (1987), 16–30; Hilary Marlow, “The Hills Are Alive! The Personification of Nature in the Psalter,” in *Leshon Limmudim: Essays*

In a recent encyclical on ecological issues, Pope Francis encouraged all people to nurture a “fraternity with all creation” in the spirit of Francis of Assisi, who called other creatures and elements his brothers and sisters.²⁶ The Pope insists: “Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for . . . if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters.”²⁷

In addition, even if another creature or feature of the world’s ecosystem cannot literally suffer or respond, we could acknowledge God-given functions for each creature and ecosystem as part of a life-sustaining and theocentric whole, and we could thus experience empathetic suffering whenever we learn of a dysfunctional creature or feature.²⁸ Geoffrey Frasz explains:

[So, I can] use my imaginative powers to see the world either from the perspective of another sentient being who is a center of a life or even as a natural entity that is made of many biotic and abiotic parts, such as a swamp, forest, or ecosystem. I can meaningfully ask what actions would benefit or harm that kind of entity as well, even though it is not conscious or sentient.²⁹

This system-functional perspective on empathy will more amenable to those who find the approach of the Earth Bible publications to be too literal at times—too much like a Gaia hypothesis—when it comes to the “voice” of the planet and its inanimate parts.³⁰

A few final caveats before we get to the biblical theology: Eventually, our capacity for other-centered empathy must expand beyond the cute and interesting flora and fauna to the mundane and even dangerous creatures where we live—

on the *Language and Literature of the Hebrew Bible in Honour of A. A. Macintosh*, ed. David A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, LHBOTS 593 (New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 189–203; Beth M. Stovell, “‘Sky Will Answer Earth, Earth Will Answer Grain’: The Personification of Nature in the Book of the Twelve” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL, Baltimore, MD, November 24, 2013); Beth M. Stovell, “‘I Will Make Her Like a Desert’: Intertextual Allusions and Feminine Agricultural Metaphors in the Book of the Twelve,” in *The Book of the Twelve and the New Form Criticism*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Michael H. Floyd, and Colin M. Toffelmire, ANEM 10 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 37–61. See also a previous issue of *Canadian Theological Review* for the importance of metaphor and personification as a means of “listening” to the nonhuman world: Deborah Bowen, “‘Seeing Beyond the Scenery’: Exploring the World through Metaphor,” *Canadian Theological Review* 2.1 (2013): 59–78.

26 Pope Francis, “Encyclical On Care for Our Common Home (24 May 2015),” *Laudato si’* AAS 107 (2015): 221, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Cf. sections 1, 2, 11, 49, 53, 87, 92, 221, 228, 246.

27 *Ibid.*, section 11.

28 See Geoffrey Frasz, “Environmental Virtue Ethics: A New Direction for Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 15/3 (1993): 129.

29 *Ibid.*

30 See Earth Bible Team, “Voice of Earth,” 24.

even to entire species, ecosystems, and watersheds.³¹ We must not operate solely with a “beauty bias” but must attend to the ugly, disheartening parts of the world.³² Similarly, we must realize that death and animal predation are not necessarily evil in God’s creation. The book of Job and life experience teach us that some chaotic and violent elements in the world are necessary parts of God’s design in mysterious ways,³³ even if pain and death are finally enemies that will disappear (Isa 25:6–9; 1 Cor 15:26, 54–57; Rev 20:4). In other words, our compassion toward the non-human world need not be overly sentimental.

Informed empathy will take larger ecosystems into account and balance non-human interests and suffering with human interests and suffering.³⁴ We must also find a balance between the extremes of free-market environmentalism, on the one hand, where financial incentives and human self-interest are supreme, and Dr. Seuss’s *Lorax* on the other hand, since the Loraxes of the world believe that we can save the world if we just care “a whole awful lot.”³⁵

To summarize so far, our emotions are impressions of the world that can be cultivated into passions formative of our character. Various influences, including mediated association through texts, can mold our empathy and sympathy—so we can suffer with and for others—even if this suffering does not always result in compassionate care by itself. Empathy for non-human creatures and features is possible if we are not narrow about creaturely responsiveness or our importance in God’s world. We must avoid favoring only the beautiful flora and fauna, and avoid extreme sentimentalism that denies the positive role of death and predation at present. Likewise, however, we must avoid apathy or contempt in relation to

31 Frasz, “Environmental Virtue Ethics,” 126.

32 Tara Flanagan, “The Broken Body of God: Moving Beyond the Beauty Bias in Ecological Ethics,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 39.2 (2012): 146–50.

33 See Brown, “Moral Cosmologies,” 18–20; Tom McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 102–45. Job learns of a fierce but good world that is not centered around humans. Both sacrificing and (eventually) the eating of animals are permitted within biblical tradition, but the creature’s life is respected via the prohibition against consuming its blood, which represents its life (Gen 9:3–4; Lev 17:10–14).

34 We can eat meat, fight against certain insects, and reduce deer where overpopulation exists, for example. Throughout this study I assume the complementary perspectives of hierarchy and mutuality in Gen 1 and Gen 2 in which we have more responsibilities than other creatures and yet are connected to them and to the land more deeply than we often assume (Jonah 4:9–11; Deut 20:19–20). But we should not fight against everything that seems to be a chaotic “enemy,” partly because not everything really is an enemy. Forest fires that are “bad” for some creatures and habitats are “good” for others. It is no simple task to determine our responses to “chaos” when humans are no longer the measure of all things. We must also pick our battles, and we need much wisdom in order to address natural disasters thoughtfully. John McPhee describes various attempts by Americans to control the Mississippi River and the damage this has caused to the ecosystem of the river basin for decades. McPhee, *The Control of Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 5–91.

35 Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1999), 58. For the debate between the Loraxes of the world and the free-market environmentalists see Blanchard and O’Brien, *Introduction to Christian Environmentalism*, 27–40.

other creatures and habitats, lest we become callous, cynical, or heartlessly economic about what is worthwhile. Wisdom and other virtues are needed to supplement empathy.

3. Earth's Lament in the Old Testament

Turning to a biblical theology of ecological suffering, I will limit the examples to *personified* suffering because these are the most potent examples that can stimulate our empathy.³⁶ With these limits, it is interesting that personified suffering only appears in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament.

3.1 *What members lament, and how is suffering expressed?*

The *kinds* of personified suffering appear in what we could call “3-D pain”: *dehydration*, *disturbance*, and *death*. Earth's lament includes mourning rituals of plants losing vegetation and the disturbance or death of earth's functions and members. Creatures and features in sea, sky, and land are affected.³⁷ Consider

36 Although early examples of ecological tension include the banishment curses of Gen 3:17–19 and 4:11–12 (also 5:29) or the cataclysm during Noah's generation (Gen 6–8), the theme of the natural world suffering along with, and as judgment on, humans is most frequent in the prophetic books (e.g., Isa 6:8–13; 13:9–13; 16:8; Isa 24; 33:7–9; Isa 34; Jer 4:23–28; 7:16–20; 12:1–4, 7–13; 23:9–11; Hos 4:1–3; Joel 1:5–20; Amos 1:2; 4:6–10; 5:7–9; 8:4–10; 9:1–6; Mic 6:11–15; Nah 1:2–8; Hab 2:17; 3:3–19; Zeph 1:2–6, 18; Hag 1:3–11). Interestingly, personified ecological suffering is found only in the writing prophets. Passages where the created order reacts to theophanies or divine wrath without clearly personified sorrow in the literary context (e.g., Pss 18:7–15; 97:5; Nah 1:4; Hab 3:3–15) will not be discussed here. My focus on the theme of lament means that this study will likewise exclude passages where non-human creatures and features are addressed or personified as legal witnesses (e.g., Isa 1:2; Jer 22:29; Mic 6:2), as sources of moral wisdom and knowledge of God (e.g., Pss 19:1–6; 97:6; Prov 6:6–8; Isa 1:3; Jer 8:7), or where they rejoice or praise God (e.g., Job 38:7; Pss 65:8–13; 96:11–13; 97:1; 145:10; 148:1–10, 13; Isa 55:12). Neither will I treat the parabolic uses of plants and animals the refer to humans (e.g., Judg 9:7–15; 2 Kgs 14:8–10; Ezek 6:1–7; 31:15), nor the mourning or complaints of inanimate artifacts of human culture, such as towns, gates, walls, or domestic masonry (e.g., Isa 23:4; Jer 14:2; Lam 2:8; Hab 2:11–12), or Daughter/Mother Zion as a physical city.

37 For categories of creatures and features which “mourn” (אָבֵד), consider the following texts which involve the dying or withered foliage located on mountain slopes (Isa 33:9; Jer 4:24; Amos 1:2), in fertile regions (Isa 33:9; Jer 4:26; 12:10), or the herbage of grazing lands away from farms (Isa 33:9; Jer 12:4; Joel 1:18–19; Amos 1:2). There are also references to the damaged land of Israel/Judah in general (Jer 12:4, 9–11; 23:10; Amos 8:8; 9:5) or its cultivated crops (Joel 1:5–20); famished herds and flocks (Joel 1:18); parched animals untamed by humans (Joel 1:20; cf. Jer 14:6); perishing birds (Jer 4:25), or both birds and land animals (Jer 12:4; 14:5). Then there is the disrupted functioning of Israelite land and sky, along with the normal creatures and visible features of each zone (Jer 4:23–28); the disruption and death of the whole Israelite ecosystem, with its humans, wild animals, birds, and fish (Hos 4:3); and even the devastation of the entire earth (Isa 24).

Other personifications of the natural world associated with mourning could be added, such as the cracking “dismay” of the ground during drought (Jer 14:4) and the darkening of the sky's lights either pictured as the donning of sackcloth or as a diseased, horrified, or gloomy countenance (Isa 24:4; 50:3; Jer 2:12; 4:28). The domesticated livestock in Nineveh are held to the same fasting and sackcloth as the humans who repent in that foreign city (Jonah 3:7–8), and these “many animals” are part of the reason God pities the city and spares it from destruction (4:11), however satirical or ironic the reason may also be. In his final protest of innocence, Job suggests that his land has never

the following two examples: In Amos 1:2, we hear, “The LORD roars from Zion, / And from Jerusalem He utters His voice; / And the shepherds’ pasture grounds mourn, / And the summit of Carmel dries up” (Amos 1:2 NASB). In Isaiah 50:3 the divine voice says, “I clothe the heavens with blackness, / and make sackcloth their covering” (NRSV resumes).

One of the most poignant aspects of this mourning is that the land undergoes rites analogous to human rituals for public displays of grief. In a book-length study of this theme, Katherine Hayes observes the parallels between humans and vegetation that are more than coincidental:

In these rituals the [human] mourner fasts, strips off clothing, shaves the head, bows down toward the ground or sits on it, and pours dust or ashes over the head and body. So in a state of drought the earth “fasts,” or is deprived of water; plants and trees wilt and droop toward the ground; the vegetative covering withers and is shed; and dust is everywhere.³⁸

In other words, when the earth “mourns” (אבל) in the Old Testament or today, the withering, starvation, and death of its members do not merely *accompany* the mourning, as if mourning were only a poetic portrayal of internal emotion. Rather, these phenomena are *the way* the earth mourns, stripping off beautiful clothing (foliage) to sit humbled in the dust. The metaphor magnifies not only God’s power, but also the extent of human involvement and connection to the rest of creation.³⁹

3.2 Reasons for ecological suffering

In all the texts where earth and its non-human members lament, their sorrow and suffering is ultimately related to human evil in one form or another, even if God brings the punishment directly on the ecosystem because of human evil.⁴⁰ The dirty laundry list that generates non-human suffering includes the following overlapping categories:

- social injustices (Amos 1:2; 8:8–9; 9:5–6; Hos 4:1–3; Joel)

“cried out” against him or “wept” (Job 31:38; cf. 31:38–40), which assumes that such weeping or crying out is possible. Less clear as potential examples of personification are Jer 49:21 and Hab 3:3–15.

38 Katherine M. Hayes, “*The Earth Mourns*”: *Prophetic Metaphor and Oral Aesthetic*, SBL AcBib 8 (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 15–16.

39 Ibid., 244.

40 Quite a diversity of details persists between the major and minor prophets. Isaiah and especially Jeremiah contain several important contributions to this motif and attribute ecological damage to divine punishment for the infidelity of God’s people and for their wicked behavior toward each other (Isa 50:1; Jer 2:5–19; 4:18, 22–28; 12:4, 7–13; 14:7, 10; 23:10–14). Occasionally the damage occurs via foreign armies (Isa 33:7–9; Jer 12:7, 9–12; cf. Joel 1:6; 2:2–11), or is suffered in a non-Israelite territory (Jer 49:16), or in the global ecosystem as a whole (Isa 24).

- interpersonal infidelity (Jer 23:10, 14; Hos 4:1–3)
- infidelity against God/Yahweh (Isa 50:1; Jer 2:5–19; 14:7, 10; Amos 8:8–9; 9:5–6)
- wartime damage (Isa 33:7–8)
- corruption among society’s leaders (Jer 2:8; 23:11, 13–14)
- violence between and within nations (Isa 24:5, 20; Jer 49:16; Amos 1:2; Jonah)
- irreverence, theft, deception (Hos 4:1–3)
- affluent lifestyles (Joel 1:5; most of Amos)

In the shorter prophetic books (the Twelve), only Joel gives extended attention to ecological damage,⁴¹ but the pain surfaces at key points in some of the others. In Amos the divine lion (Yahweh) “roars” to signal the capture of nations (including Judah and Israel) who have treated other nations or their own citizens with inhumane oppression (Amos 1:2; cf. Amos 1:3–2:16). This roar literarily signifies or echoes the earthquake and consequent drought mentioned in the opening discourse (Amos 1:1–2).⁴² Social injustice and disloyalty to Yahweh in the Northern Kingdom (Israel) are the reasons for social and natural disturbances in the book (Amos 8:8–9; 9:5–6).⁴³ In Hosea the charge is essentially the same, and Hosea 4 summarizes the prophetic testimony on this point quite well (Hos 4:1–3):

- 1 Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
- 2 Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.

41 See Laurie J. Braaten, “Earth Community in Joel: A Call to Identify with the Rest of Creation,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger, SBL SymS 46 (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 69. The reason for the ecological damage is quite vague but may be related to drunkenness and the oppression of the weak that sometimes accompanies it (Joel 1:5; cf. Isa 5:11–13, 20–23; Amos 6:4–7).

42 Cf. Katherine M. Hayes, “The Mourning Earth (Amos 1:2) and the God Who Is,” *Word and World* 28.2 (2008): 141–49.

43 Throughout Amos, then, the voice of the non-human world is an additional prophetic voice (besides Amos’s own) warning humanity and cooperating with God as an agent of judgment (and blessing), as noted in Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics: Re-Reading Amos, Hosea and First Isaiah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146, 152, 156. See also Hilary Marlow, “The Other Prophet! The Voice of Earth in the Book of Amos,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger, SBL SymS 46 (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 75–83.

- 3 Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.

As many scholars have noted, the legal indictment here reverses the created order described in Genesis 1:20–28, thus portraying “an unmaking of creation.”⁴⁴ In this court case, then, “Earth stands as both judge and victim . . . mourning in response to Israel’s crimes and suffering the cosmic devastation that is the result of its own grief.”⁴⁵

3.3 *Biblical responses to ecological suffering*

Since dysfunction in the ecosystem is mostly blamed on our human negligence and deeds, it comes as no surprise that the main biblical response centers on human distress at our complicity in causing the damage. This empathetic distress should lead to *repentance*, consisting of a relational, contrition-filled return to God and a reversal of unjust practices and of idolatrous worship.⁴⁶ Repentant contrition may also include mourning rituals expressing our sorrow and our appeals to God.⁴⁷ Ecological devastation can instill a fear of God in us, and both increase our ac-

44 Melissa Tubbs Loya, “‘Therefore the Earth Mourns’: The Grievance of Earth in Hosea 4:1–3,” in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger, SBL SymS 46 (Atlanta: SBL, 2008), 60.

45 *Ibid.*, 62.

46 See Hos 3:4–5; 4:15; 5:15; 6:1–3; 7:10; 10:12; 11:10–11; 12:6; 14:1–3; Joel 2:12–14; Amos 4:6–13; 5:7, 10–15; 5:21–27; 8:4–14; 9:10; Jonah 3:8–10. Despite much continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament (before Jesus inaugurated the new covenant) and the church today, there are significant organizational shifts for God’s people. So while I take the Old Testament texts as fully authoritative for the church, their authority is *paradigmatic* in guiding our responses in contemporary contexts. For a balanced discussion, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 23–47, 62–75, 85–99, 457–69.

47 After all, ecological damage resulting in crop failures and droughts affect everyone from the over-consumer to the poor, from religious functionaries to farm workers, from human populace to domestic and wild animals, to say nothing of the plants themselves (Joel 1:5, 9–13, 17–20). Appropriate actions may include tears (Joel 1:5); wailing (Joel 1:5, 11, 13); wearing mourners’ clothing (Joel 1:8, 13; Jonah 3:5–6, 8); feeling shame, which mirrors the “dismay/withering” (בִּישָׁ) of the crops (Joel 1:10–12); abstinence from food and water (Joel 1:14; 2:12, 15; Jonah 3:5, 7); public assemblies for appealing to God in prayer (Hos 5:15–6:3; Joel 1:14; 2:15–17; Amos 5:6; Jonah 3:8); private prayers (Joel 1:19; Jonah 3:8); prayer by leadership (Joel 2:17); postponing social plans as significant as marriage (Joel 2:16–17); and, of course, oral and written expressions of repentance and sorrow (as all these biblical texts testify). Some repentance and worship rituals are not genuine and merely reflect sorrow over the *losses* experienced rather than sorrow and confession over wrongs committed against others (Hos 7:14; 9:4). Images of the natural world suffering are designed to provoke us to shame and acceptance of our guilt as unfaithful, rebellious people of God (Jer 2–3), since the skies have to be horrified for us (Isa 50:3; Jer 2:12). This need not be a paralyzing shame, however, because God’s offered mercy gives real hope for reconciliation (cf. Jer 3:3, 12–14, 22–25). If pain is God’s “megaphone to rouse a deaf world,” as C. S. Lewis memorably put it, then the suffering of the nonhuman world is God’s eco-phone to summon a

countability as his scattered but covenant people, and also comfort those who have been wronged by injustice (Jer 49:7–22; Amos 1:3–2:16).⁴⁸

Of course, not all natural disasters are directly caused by human mismanagement or injustice, and not all are punishments. But our ignorance in the face of some disasters coexists with increasing knowledge of how we are to blame for a good many of the world's devastating events. The Old Testament focuses primarily on ruptures in the relationship between God and other people, while the environmental movement focuses on people and the ecosystem, but these may be two sides of the same coin. In view of the planet's ecological damage, what the texts call for is no less than an "ecological conversion," as Cristina Vanin observes in a recent *CTR* article.⁴⁹ Such an ecological conversion would require a shift in our thinking, feeling, and living from merely economic or human-centered factors to include other places and faces, both of the creatures and of the Creator.⁵⁰

There is a second and final major category of responses that cluster around other-focused sympathy and compassion: As Katherine Hayes puts it, "When none repents, earth laments."⁵¹ As it laments, our own empathetic distress should develop into sympathy and compassion for our fellow sufferers. This is very clear in Jeremiah 12, in God's (implicit) response to the prophet's question. First Jeremiah asks:

How long will the land mourn,
and the grass of every field wither?
For the wickedness of those who live in it
the animals and the birds are swept away,
and because people said, "He is blind to our ways." (Jer 12:4)

Then Yahweh responds:

They have made it a desolation;
desolate, it mourns to me.

world with fingers stuck in our ears, preoccupied with what we imagine to be our self-contained pleasures and pains. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 91.

48 F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 373–76. It can either inspire fear among the ungodly and acknowledgment of God's power to judge (Isa 33:10–14; Joel 2:1–11) or it can be a setting for assurance to believers of deliverance from enemies (Isa 33:15–24).

49 Cristina Vanin, "Expanding the Boundaries of Human Subjectivity: The Need for Ecological Conversion," *Canadian Theological Review* 3.1 (2014): 55–65.

50 Ibid., 57, 59, 61.

51 Katherine M. Hayes, "When None Repents, Earth Laments: The Chorus of Lament in Jeremiah and Joel," in *Seeking the Favor of God: The Origins of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 121, 132.

The whole land is made desolate,
but no one lays it to heart. (Jer 12:11)

Notice that both the prophet and our God are caught up in the emotional suffering of this pitiful scene. Indeed, it is up to the reader to distinguish the voice of the prophet from the voice of God; in the text, the voices bleed into each other in suffering with and for the hurting land and creatures.⁵² We can thus follow the example of both God and prophet in mourning the destruction of the land (we might say planet) and in pleading for God to bring healing (Jer 14:7–9; Amos 7:1–6). We can also act compassionately as we learn how to help rather than hurt. As we lament the pain and as we pray, we may be pleasantly relieved to find that God speaks a passionate promise of restoration for the ecosystem, as he does in Joel 2 (and also in Hos 2:14–23; Amos 9:13–15):

18 Then the LORD became jealous [or “passionate”] for his land,
and had pity on his people.

. . .

21 Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!

22 Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

52 Though it is possible that the prophet rather than God is lamenting here in Jer 12, Terence E. Fretheim notes that Jer 12 (like Jer 8:18–9:3) “makes little effort to distinguish between the prophet’s words and God’s words (explicit only in 12.14); their voices tend to ‘bleed’ into one another.” Fretheim, “The Earth Story in Jeremiah 12,” in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, ed. Norman C. Habel, The Earth Bible 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 98.

Complicating the emotional picture, Yahweh’s anger is partly responsible for the ecological damage as a response to human corruption (Jer 12:7–13) (Fretheim, “Earth Story in Jeremiah 12,” 100–101). But anger is not the opposite of love; the opposite of love is apathy, and Yahweh is not an apathetic deity. For those skeptical of the justice of this divine anger for the ecosystem, there are several reasonable justifications. See Hilary Marlow, “Justice for Whom? Social and Environmental Ethics and the Hebrew Prophets,” in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, ed. Katharine J. Dell, LHBOTS 528 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 111–13. Marlow makes three important points: 1) In many cases, the rich may have acquired the land from the poor—Amos and Micah certainly imply as much—and thus it is the oppressors who are brought down to the level of the poor with these environmental catastrophes; 2) the land as a conditional, covenantal gift can be revoked upon Israel’s disobedience, since Yahweh owns it; and 3) collective sins justify collective punishment that affects the whole environment rather than just specific individuals. Beyond that, God often brings judgment via the natural consequences of our actions. See Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 49–55. Also see Fretheim, “Earth Story in Jeremiah 12,” 101–102.

- 23 O children of Zion, be glad
 and rejoice in the LORD your God;
 for he has given the early rain for your vindication,
 he has poured down for you abundant rain,
 the early and the later rain, as before.
 (Joel 2:18, 21–23; larger unit 2:18–27)

4. Conclusion

Like a canary in a coal mine—the non-human community suffers first, and often dies first. And yet this ecological mourning is a call to us to pay attention, to listen to the pain, and to move towards repentance and compassion as needed. We may not presume on God’s compassion, but we can stand prophetically for those who have no human voice. We can lament the destruction of the planet that is taking place and plead for God to bring healing as we act in compassionate ways.

Shaped by the narratives we buy into, the life experiences we have, the things we habitually do, and so on, our ability to experience empathetic and sympathetic distress—to emotionally suffer with and for others—can produce a host of responses that are inwardly and outwardly focused. In order to be compassionate people, we must exercise our imaginations in role-taking and in mediated, textual depictions of suffering, and we must cultivate other virtues, particularly love.

By turning our empathetic care toward non-human creatures and features of the cosmos, we refuse to have a narrow-minded view of who is capable of suffering and of responsive agency; and we mourn the dysfunctional operations of the world, even if the inanimate parts might not have the same degree of responsiveness as living organisms. Thus we can listen and hear that the hills *are* alive with the sound of occasional weeping, just not in human language. With time and perseverance, our moral vision may extend beyond cute and cuddly animals to embrace others more foreign and even threatening to us. A God-centered wisdom and humility will help us avoid mere sentimentalism, on the one hand, and presumptuous contempt, on the other.

In seeking to cultivate this kind of character in our Christian communities, we must be ready for the obstacles such as passivity, prideful denial, and fear-filled despair at the magnitude of the problems. To avoid passive empathy aimed “out there somewhere” or at “the whole world” we will need to be actively looking for connections between the biblical text and our local contexts.⁵³ We must love “the global through the local,” as Russell Moore noted in a recent *JETS* article.⁵⁴

53 Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 170.

54 Russell D. Moore, “Heaven and Nature Sing: How Evangelical Theology Can Inform the Task of Environmental Protection (and Vice Versa),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57.3 (2014): 583.

We must also work to become ecologically literate so that our concerns are increasingly guided by informed understandings of how we can love our non-human neighbors as ourselves (Lev 19:18; Luke 10:27). An attitude of denial will ask, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), expecting no answer besides what is comfortable.

Humility will be open to new insights about non-human neighbors and neighborhoods (habitats), even if they are inconvenient to help or painful to acknowledge. Still, there is no substitute for actually spending time outside observing, feeling, and attending to the earth and her creatures.⁵⁵ We will only love places and creatures that we know and experience, and will lovingly suffer with them only if we deeply experience our ecological “places of the heart.”⁵⁶ Those who lack such “places of the heart,” according to Steven Bouma-Prediger, may be apathetic precisely because they “know no place well enough to really inhabit it.”⁵⁷ So, the most spiritual thing to do after finishing this article might well be to step away from our restless routines and schedule a hike in a park or preserve near home. Joy and hope in God’s creative, redemptive purposes will sustain us in the sorrow that will also be found along the journey. And we will not be alone in the “world of wounds.” Other hikers in fellowship with the Creator will walk the trails too.

This study is a call to engagement with, rather than retreat from, the world. It is a call to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15), knowing that ultimately those who weep will be comforted (Matt 5:4) by a priestly king who has suffered and is able to sympathize with our weaknesses on the journey (Heb 2:9–10; 4:15; 5:7–8). The Spirit of God groans along with the earth and its human members until our resurrection hope is realized (Rom 8:18–27). As we journey, we cannot do everything, but let that not be our excuse to avoid doing *some* things. After all, heaven has no sorrow that earth cannot feel.

55 Vanin observes: “If we are going to respond adequately to the ecological crisis, one critical step we need to take is to recover a capacity for being in communion with the natural world.” Vanin, “Expanding the Boundaries,” 58.

56 Bouma-Prediger, *Beauty of the Earth*, 21. Getting to know the places where we live is not merely an individual task, but a pedagogical task for teachers to consider incorporating into their courses. See an example in Steven Bouma-Prediger, “What Kind of Person Would Do Something Like That? A Christian Ecological Virtue Ethic,” *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 20/1 (2016): 20–31.

57 Bouma-Prediger, *Beauty of the Earth*, 149.